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AUTHOR Koren, Johan
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ABSTRACT

Rural communities face a dilemma in their efforts to keep pace with knowledge developments. Their remoteness makes access to knowledge of the outside world difficult, time-consuming, and costly. At the same time, the fact that there is access of a sort can mean that local knowledge becomes lost or discarded as somehow inferior. The pervasiveness of Anglo-American content on the World Wide Web amounts to virtual colonialism and threatens the survival of other cultures. The knowledge of indigenous peoples is particularly vulnerable. The challenge is to enable access to valuable knowledge globally and, concurrently, to mobilize resources that conserve the best of local knowledge and share that knowledge globally. The public library is situated strategically between community and globality. It is a portal providing access to information and knowledge resources through interlibrary loan networks and the Internet and, at the same time, collecting locally-produced information and knowledge resources unique to the area that it serves. However, no single agency alone has the resources for such a task. Collaboration is the key. Knowledge cooperatives involving businesses, communities, and state agencies, such as the Arctic Borderlands Ecological Knowledge Cooperative, and cooperation and mergers among local municipal libraries can achieve the critical mass necessary to attract properly qualified personnel and amass an adequate budget for appropriate technology. (Contains 31 references.) (TD)

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Johan Koren, USA

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The Glocal Portal: The Public Library As A Partner In Rural Knowledge Cooperatives

Johan Koren, USA

Abstract

Knowledge is the fuel of community development. Schools and services deal in knowledge, as do businesses, and without access to it, all stagnate. Rural communities face a dual dilemma in their efforts to keep pace with knowledge developments. Their remoteness makes access to the knowledge of the world "outside" difficult, time-consuming and costly. At the same time, the very fact that there nevertheless is access of a sort can mean that local knowledge becomes lost or discarded as somehow inferior. The knowledge of indigenous peoples is particularly vulnerable. The challenge, then, will be to mobilize resources that enable access to valuable knowledge globally and concurrently mobilize resources that can conserve the best of local knowledge and, more, share that knowledge globally. The public library has been called a "strategic in-between element" between community and globality. It stands, Janus-like, as a portal providing access to information and knowledge resources through the traditional channels of the inter-library loan networks and now also through the Internet, and, at the same time, has collected locally-produced information and knowledge resources that are unique to the area that it serves. Alone, however, no single agency has the resources for such a task. Cooperation and collaboration is the key, as it was with electrification. Knowledge cooperatives are suggested as a solution, similar to the North Yukon Ecological Knowledge Cooperative, with a broader application.

Knowledge: The Resource for the Millennium

Knowledge is the fuel of community development. Schools and services deal in knowledge, as do businesses, and without access to it, all stagnate. Indeed, knowledge has been proclaimed "the currency of the new millennium." (Kochikar, 2000). The closing years of the 1990s saw a proliferation of publications touting the centrality of knowledge and the necessity to manage a company's knowledge assets, to the extent that knowledge management (KM) became established as a recognized academic subject at the graduate level and a standard text issued under the aegis of the American Society for Information Science (Srikantaiah and Koenig, 2000).

Yet knowledge is no entirely new interest that has sprung fully-fledged to human attention in the 1990s. The Wisdom literature of the Old Testament extolled the virtues of knowledge:

Choose my instruction instead of silver knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is more precious than rubies, and nothing you desire can compare with her (Proverbs 8:10-11, NIV).

Even before that, the Bhagavad-Gita asserted that "Knowledge, the object of knowledge and the knower are the three factors which motivate action; the senses, the work and the doer comprise the threefold basis of action." Indeed, a whole branch of philosophy, namely epistemology, has struggled with the meaning of knowledge since ancient times, as Pemberton clearly demonstrates (1998).

But why this emphasis on knowledge at this juncture in human history? Pemberton (1998) hints at one reason in his inclusion of a table delineating the evolution of the management of organizational resources, from the financial management of capital in the 1920s, through the management of manpower, materials, facilities, information, service, information technology in the successive decades following, until finally knowledge management emerges in the 1990s. Prusak (1998), however, points to a more timely cause than mere evolution: globalization of the economy, "which is putting terrific pressure on firms for increased adaptability, innovation, and process speed." Charles Leadbeater (1999) puts a more sinister twist on this phenomenon by laying the blame at the door of "finance capitalism, the most obvious and maligned force, . . . the disruptive power of deregulated, interconnected global financial markets, which swirl around the world in pursuit of shareholder value." At times allied with financial capitalism, at times at odds with it, Leadbeater sees two other forces driving changes in the economy: the one harnesses the knowledge capital in "the drive to generate new ideas and turn them speedily into commercial products and services," the other channels social capital, the relationships between people and organizations, into an "'ethic of trust and collaboration . . . [towards the goal] of creating social solidarity." It is Leadbeater's conclusion that the aim of development must be "to harness the power of both markets and community to the more fundamental goal of creating and spreading knowledge." (1999).

But this allows us no opportunity to arrive at a definition of the concept of this thing that is to be created, spread and managed in the face of globalization. *Knowledge* can be as slippery a notion to pin down as *information*, and, indeed, in many contexts, the two are erroneously used interchangeably. Davenport and Prusak (1998) assert that knowledge is close to action, and echo the Bhagavad-Gita in their insistence that knowledge cannot be separated from the knower: "Knowledge exists within people, part and parcel of human

complexity and unpredictability." Its key components are "experience, truth, judgment and rules of thumb." And its manifestations can be explicit or tacit: recorded in human- or machine-readable form, and the domain of records managers, archivists or librarians (Srikantaiah, 2000) or stored in the human memory, barely conscious, the knowledge of the practitioner in context (Crowley, 2000).

This concept of knowledge has consequences for education in a global economy, as Cogburn (1998) points out, citing an argument from the Global Information Infrastructure Commission (GIIC at <http://www.giic.org/>), an international, independent, non-governmental private sector organization:

The globalization of the economy and its concomitant demands on the workforce requires a different education that enhances the ability of learners to access, assess, adopt, and apply knowledge, to think independently, to exercise appropriate judgment and to collaborate with others to make sense of new situations. The objective of education is no longer simply to convey a body of knowledge, but to teach how to learn, problem-solve and synthesize the old with the new. (1998)

Traditionally structured systems of education are increasingly ineffective in the production of graduates who can attain such knowledge. "More importantly," asserts Cogburn (1998), again quoting from the GIIC, "knowledge based businesses often complain that graduates lack the capacity to learn new skills and assimilate new knowledge." A crucial skill in this connection must be to come to grips with the forces which are shaping this globalization and channel the technology and the infrastructure of global knowledge to the advantage of the local community.

Knowledge in the rural context

Rural communities face a dual dilemma in their efforts to keep pace with knowledge developments in this globalized economy. On the one hand, there is the same challenge Cogburn (1998) indicates for developing countries, namely, a lack, or at best a disproportionate distribution, of access to the technological infrastructure necessary for the production and dissemination of knowledge. On the other hand, the very fact that there nevertheless is access of a sort can mean that local knowledge becomes lost or discarded as somehow inferior. The pervasiveness of Anglo-American culture on the Internet has led to fears for the survival of other cultures. The Norwegian government's action plan for information technology in the cultural arena for the years 1998-2001, "Skape, bevare, formidle" [Create, preserve, disseminate] (1997) explicitly cites the threats to the survival of Norwegian language and culture when it claims, without supporting statistics, that over 90% of the content of the World Wide Web is in the English language. In the same way, Justin Chisenga (1999) warns, unless "deliberate steps are taken to contribute to global information, the [African]

continent's millions of inhabitants will never access their own content, and will forever, even in the electronic age, remain consumers of electronic information and cultural products produced from outside the continent." Nazer (1999) goes so far as to call the pervasiveness of Anglo-American content an outright "Western colonization of the Global Village."

The extent to which such fears are justified has yet to be determined. Whatever may be the case, it can be argued that native knowledge could be seen as particularly vulnerable in this regard. The culture, languages and traditional knowledge of indigenous peoples has long been under threat, both passive and active, from the dominant cultures of the nation states that have entered their ancient domains. Phebe Fjellström (1968) depicted the ethnocentrism of the Swedish crown from its earliest dealings with the Sámi (the indigenous peoples of the Nordic countries, traditionally called Lapps, a term considered offensive by the Sámi themselves, with its connotation of rags and patches, since *lapp*=patch), as far back as the 1600s and before, as it assessed the Sami economy and division of labor according to the values of the Swedish farmers' economy. Similar instances of prejudice and active (and passive) government attempts to assimilate indigenous peoples and destroy their language and culture can be documented from other regions of the world. It is interesting, for example, that, while the Norwegian government's Action Plan for IT in the cultural arena (Skape, bevare, formidle, 1997) talks of the "integration" of groups of "foreign" origin and specifically immigrants to Norway, the position of the unique native Sámi culture receives no mention. At the same time, there are the difficulties experienced by the minorities within the minorities, such as the South Saami of North Central Scandinavia (approximately Trondheim to Bodø and east into Sweden, see the map at the end of the paper), whose language is almost as distinct from the majority North Sámi as Norwegian is from German. Efforts to preserve their distinct language and culture have included the South Saami's own insistence on the continuance of their residential schools and a special bookmobile service instituted by the Nordland Regional Library. (Elsvatn, 1999).

Indigenous knowledge has value for rural communities, as the activities of the World Bank demonstrate (see Building on Local Knowledge, 1998-99). Sharing that knowledge and applying it to common problems is crucial. Fikret Berkes (1999) summarizes the main lessons of traditional ecological knowledge into three clusters: the combination of unity and diversity in traditional indigenous systems, the advantages of participatory, community-based resource management, and the potential of forging new and meaningful ethical principles for ecological management. Berkes writes elsewhere (1998) of the "complementarity of traditional and Western [ecological] knowledge at a practical level." A challenging model of participatory, community-based

initiatives may be found in the ecological knowledge cooperative, described by Kofinas (1998) as a "collaborative alliance of First Nation organizations, co-management bodies, state agencies, and resources user communities. Its objective is to monitor the trends of environmental change." The successor would appear to be the Arctic Borderlands Ecological Knowledge Cooperative, which has established a presence on the World Wide Web, in part to meet "a need to easily find information on research and monitoring, both past and present, in the Northern Yukon and adjacent Alaska and NWT." (1999) It was decided already at the opening meeting in 1994 that "an important part of the Co-op should be to bring together science and local/traditional knowledge." (Arctic Borderlands Knowledge Co-op: An overview). There is an information page as part of the website which includes an Arctic Borderlands Database of Information Sources, which provides access to references, including reports, series of reports, file sets, map series, and data sets. Clearly, the Co-op sees part of its role as a portal to local knowledge.

The Global-Local Portal

These cooperative endeavors do not, however, explicitly mention one institution that has traditionally acted as a repository both of global and local knowledge and can therefore play a central role in the knowledge environment within the rural community. The public library has been called a "strategic in-between element" between community and globality. (Lund, 1991). It stands, Janus-like, as a portal providing access to information and knowledge resources through the traditional channels of the inter-library loan networks and now also through the Internet. At the same time, the public library has collected locally-produced information and knowledge resources that are unique to the area that it serves. Indeed, the public library as a meeting place both physically and intellectually between the global and the local gainsays the traditional discourse of opposition between the two that Robertson (1995) warns against.

Bernard Vavrek, director of the Center for the Study of Rural Librarianship at Clarion University, discusses the role of the public library in the rural community (1995), and sees a potential for the library as a provider of lifelong learning. In addition, Yu, et al. (1999) describe the development, potentials and implications for public libraries as participants and potential leaders in the advent of community networks. There are barriers, however, in the form of attitudes and paucity of resources, both financial and personnel. Nevertheless, the success stories investigated by Salmon (1999) suggest that growth, vitality and a relevant role do exist as a result of a number of factors: enthusiastic interest, careful assessment, initiative, getting help from others, planning, realizing new knowledge and learning, and,

especially, cooperative efforts. And it is precisely in such cooperative efforts that rural development has traditionally been furthered, as, for example, in the area of electrification, which has been seen as a model for the development of viable telecommunications networks in rural areas (Marek, 1995, Freshwater, 1998).

A Cooperative Partner for Glocal Development

Bengt Johannisson (1994) has demonstrated "glocalization" as "a generic (small-business) approach to create competitiveness where penetration of glo-bal [sic] product and resource markets is combined with an advanced integration in a lo-cal [sic] entrepreneurial context." The local entrepreneurial context he shows from his own and other empirical evidence to be grounded in local/regional networks where an international orientation has become "a collective property," a global demand for "customized products and associated production technology" is being met, there is a high tolerance for the necessary risks involved, there are synergies involved in the blending of competition and cooperation ("coopetition", see Buchen, 1994), and finally, there exists a high degree of local ingenuity and variety.

Such a glocalization strategy, blending together the global and the local, could be best served through the creation of diverse, multicultural cooperatives similar to the Arctic Borderlands Ecological Knowledge Cooperative, where the aim is the pooling of a broader knowledge capital both locally and globally, toward the retrieval and harnessing of greater resources. A possible application can be found in the north central areas of Norway and Sweden. Saemien Sijte, the South Saemi cultural center in Snåsa, north of Trondheim, (see map) initiated in 1996 a pilot project in cooperation with tourist organizations in North Trøndelag and the North Trøndelag Regional Council. The aim was to develop "market oriented products and product packages both connected to and independent of Saemien Sijte," which could present South Saemi culture for the tourist market. (Sørsamisk næringsliv og kulturformidling, 1997). Because such product development would take time and financing, this pilot project focused on an analysis of the cultural and political prerequisites for product development and stimulation for further development. Essentially, the project was the first step in a knowledge assessment/knowledge mobilization project.

On their own, the developers of this project could not hope to develop the expertise and the knowledge required to create an infrastructure and develop and market a product that will attract tourists to the region, as Elsvatn (1999) points out. It requires input from business, tourist boards, and education in languages and launching out to foster contacts with potential visitors and tour operators from other parts of the world. It requires building a database of knowledge

both local and global. Survival of rural areas demands participation in cooperative ventures of this kind, similar to the Basque Mondragon groups. MacLeod (1997) offers an optimistic picture of the benefits of cooperative participation:

In this age of giant business and giant government, where small community groups feel powerless against forces which are destructive of their fundamental values, the community business approach offers an appropriate technology that is within the reach of all of us. It is something doable for those who are concerned about unemployment and the decline of our communities. It is something that we can do which is based upon traditional values of sharing and mutual responsibility. It is old-fashioned in many ways, but it we are to have a future, it also the way of the future. (1997).

The local public library has a clear role to play in this cooperative, as the global portal, standing at the threshold between the global and the local. And not only as a repository and a compiler of knowledge. The library can also furnish the physical space for meetings of this knowledge cooperative. However, here, too, critical mass is essential, in order to attract properly qualified personnel and amass a budget suitable for appropriate technology. Regional cooperation and even mergers among local municipal libraries into regional library systems like Minnesota's Traverse des Sioux Library System or leadership from the centralized regional and state libraries can provide such critical mass. Adaptation of local library networking projects pioneered by a Norwegian regional library, Nordland fylkesbibliotek (Nilsen, 2000), making possible the alleviation of limited technology and personnel resources at the local level, would provide much needed technological support and, by extension, allow greater access to global knowledge sources. The addition of other local participants combining to create a regional knowledge cooperative motivated by the shared values of community could see similar results to the famous cooperatives of Mondragon. (MacLeod, 1997).

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Map showing South Saemi cultural centers

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